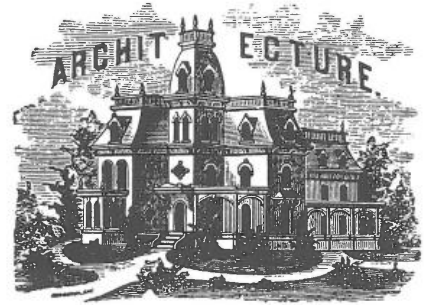


# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



**Charles A. Platt**  
1861-1933

Although Charles A. Platt made his initial architectural reputation as the designer of summer houses, he surprisingly only built one house in Maine. Yet the Theodore Dunham house of 1902 at Northeast Harbor is representative of Platt's early domestic formula and of his architectural career at large.

While Platt is best remembered as an architect today, he was a successful artist in several media.<sup>1</sup> He was born in New York City in 1861 to John Platt, a corporation lawyer, and to Mary Cheney Platt, a member of the silk-mill-owning family of Manchester, Connecticut. Charles was privately educated and began his artistic training in 1876 at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League. In 1879, while summering at Bolton's Landing in New York State, he met the Philadelphia artist Stephen Parrish, who introduced Charles to the recently revived fine art of etching. Platt quickly mastered the process and had begun to receive national recognition as an etcher before his twentieth birthday. Characteristic of his work is the view of Bangor harbor (Figure 1) of 1882, showing his fascination with atmospheric marine studies.<sup>2</sup> He continued to etch into the 1920s.



Figure 1. *Bangor Harbor*, Etching by Charles A. Platt, 1882 (Courtesy of the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts).

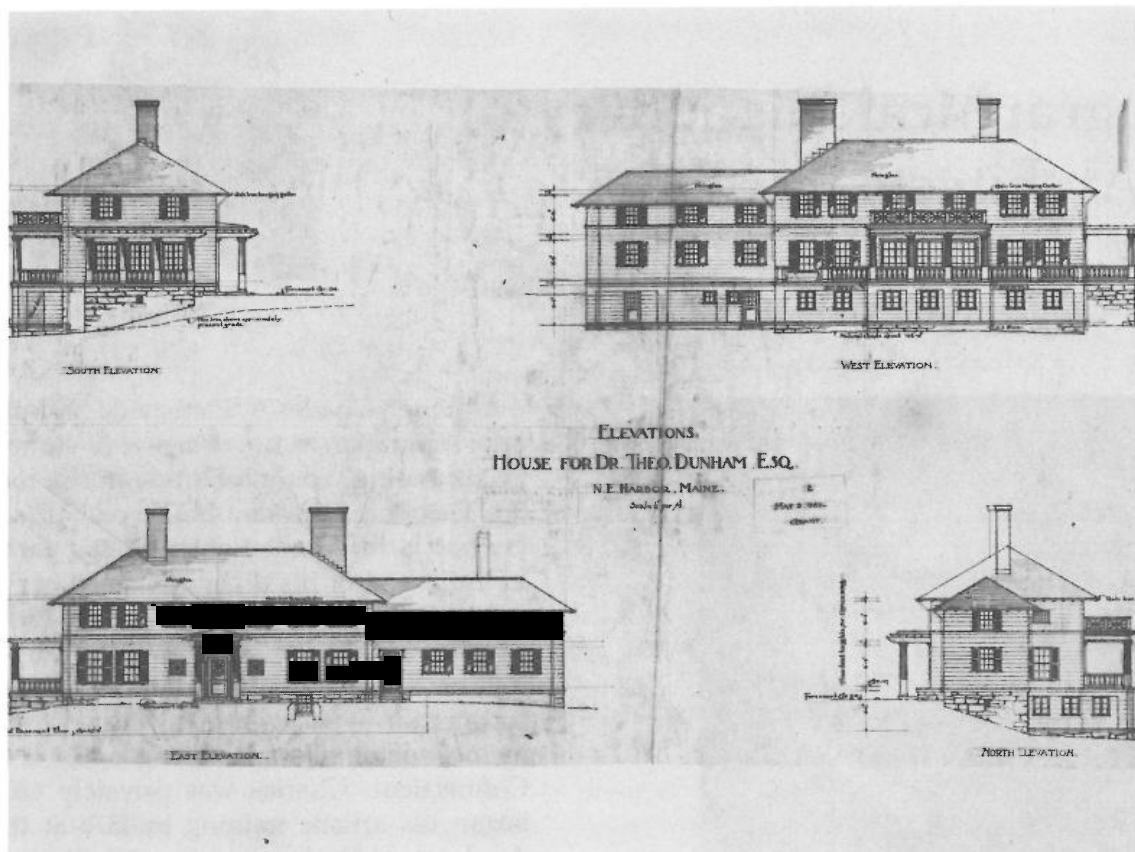


Figure 2. Elevations of the Theodore N. Dunham House, Northeast Harbor, 1902 drawing (Courtesy of the Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University).

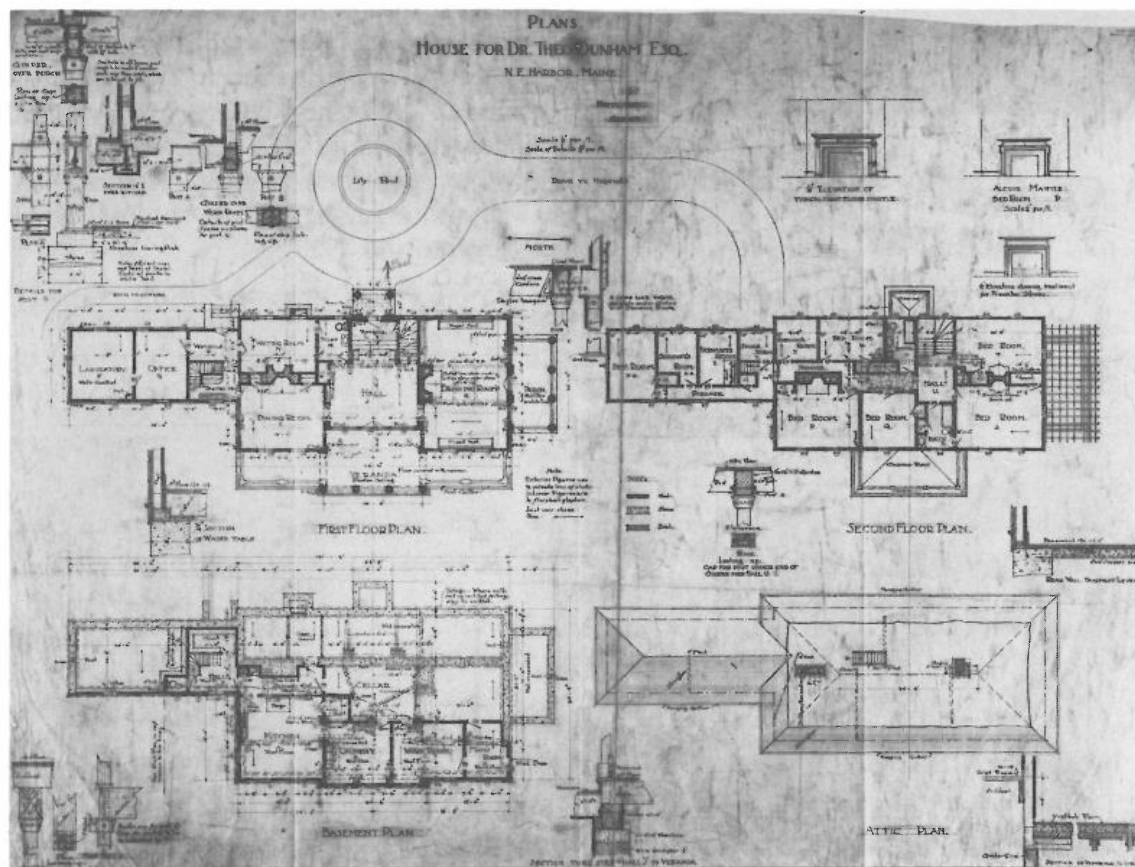


Figure 3. Floor Plans of the Theodore N. Dunham House, Northeast Harbor, 1902 drawing (Courtesy of the Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University).

Despite his success as an etcher, Platt wished to paint and had decided by the early 1880s that he must go to Paris to continue his training. Abroad from 1882 through 1886, Platt first worked independently in Holland and Paris and then entered the Academie Julian in 1884. During these years in Paris, Platt became interested in architecture, discussing their work with architectural students and applying unsuccessfully for admission to the architecture section of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. After his return to the United States, however, Platt continued to work as a landscape painter, joining the summer artist colony at Cornish, New Hampshire, in 1889.<sup>3</sup> He designed his own simple studio house and garden the following summer and throughout the 1890s and early 1900s received commissions from his artist neighbors. His ideas for these summer residences were derived from the villages of the Italian Renaissance which he had visited during his student years in Paris and which he studied in detail during a sketching and photography tour of Italy in the spring of 1892 with his younger brother William, who was then training to become a landscape architect. In 1894 Platt published *Italian Gardens*, the result of his observations and the first illustrated study in English on the gardens of Renaissance Italy.<sup>4</sup> The popularity of this book brought Platt commissions for large Italian-inspired gardens to embellish substantial country houses designed by other architects. The next logical step was for Platt to expand upon the lessons he had learned in the houses for his Cornish neighbors and to declare himself an architect, which he did at the turn of the century. In all his varied careers, he only received academic training as a painter. He taught himself the art of etching, landscape design and architecture, the three fields in which he had the greatest success.

The Theodore Dunham House (Figures 2 and 3) at Northeast Harbor is characteristic of Platt's transition from his places for artist neighbors at Cornish to the more expansive country houses which became the focus of his work in the first decade of this century. The Dunham House is related to two earlier Cornish projects for Grace and Edith Lawrence, a concert pianist and her sister, of 1896, and for Herbert Croly, the architectural critic and later founder of *The New Republic*, of 1897.<sup>5</sup> In these houses, Platt developed a variable model that he considered appropriate for the informal summer life of sophisticated, but not ostentatious, urbanites. He manipulated the characteristic low massing, hipped roof, deep overhanging eaves, rough textured flush boarding with deep channels between the boards, characteristic loggias and balanced plans for a series of related houses in Dublin and Chocorua, New Hampshire;

Hadlyme, Connecticut; and Woodstock, Vermont.<sup>6</sup> Invariably painted white and carefully set in their sites, these houses spoke with proper proportions and great charm of New England and the Renaissance, fresh air and recreation. These summer houses were the first of a series of universal design solutions that Platt evolved and varied for specific building types.

Platt's Maine client, Theodore N. Dunham (1871-1951), was born in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, educated at Harvard (A.B. 1885, M.D. 1889) and trained in surgery in Vienna. He was a professor of surgery at New York Post Graduate Medical School and Hospital and developed a new surgical procedure for hare lip and cleft palate.<sup>7</sup> He had a summer office, waiting room and laboratory in the north wing of his Maine house from which he served the health needs of the island residents from 1902 until 1951. The space required for his clinic increased the scale of the Dunham House and somewhat altered Platt's characteristic plan of this period.

The Dunham House is set on a hillside site that falls away abruptly to the west overlooking Northeast Harbor. Platt brought the entrance drive from the highway along the water up to a circular forecourt on the east side of the house. Here the visitor is greeted by a generous seven-bay facade with the columned and pedimented doorway flanked by square thermal windows. The entry is surmounted by four double-hung windows at the second story, emphasizing the central focus for the house. On entering, one passes through a vestibule into a large central hall with the main stairway climbing over the vestibule. The hall is lighted at the rear by three double glass doors that lead out to a semi-recessed loggia in the center of the west or waterside elevation. A veranda extends in a deck across the entire west facade, but only the central section is columned and covered. The stair hall also provides access to the other major spaces of the first floor—a drawing room equal to the two southern bays of the long facades with a separate columned, lattice-topped porch to the south; a dining room at the northwest corner; and the clinic's waiting room and toilet at the northeast corner of the main section of the house. The integration of interior and exterior spaces through the veranda, deck and porch, and the axial drama of a direct view of the water from the entrance hall are both typical of Platt ideals in organizing and siting a house. Because of the need for office space on the first floor level and the steep incline of the site, Platt placed the kitchen and other service spaces in the basement level below the main section of the house. The second floor contains five bedrooms, two bathrooms and a servant's room in the central section and

an additional bedroom, two servants' rooms and a store room in the wing to the north.

By the time of the Dunham project, Platt had begun to attract those more substantial commissions for expansive country homes on which his reputation was based. In 1904, he was the subject of a major and laudatory article in the *Architectural Record* that reviewed his work to date. When *A Monograph of the Work of Charles A. Platt* was published in 1913, the architect had come to dominate country house architecture in the United States. Ironically, the passage of the graduated income tax in that year, and other related factors, quickly affected the construction of the large country places on which his reputation had been so rapidly built. However, Platt had already begun a series of urban buildings—town houses, apartment buildings and commercial structures—including a large number of commissions for the Vincent Astor Estate Office in Manhattan. But the major focus of his career in the 1910s and 1920s was institutional design, especially museums, academic buildings and campus master plans. The success of his Freer Gallery of Art (1913-23) in Washington, D.C., generated commissions for six other museums, including a unrealized scheme for the National Gallery of Art. In the 1920s, he moved easily from museums to academic buildings, most notably the master plan and nine buildings for the University of Illinois in Urbana and the master plan and six new buildings for Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts.

While the evolution from private, domestic commissions to public, institutional projects was the characteristic route to professional and financial success, Platt's most appealing and coherent designs remain the domestic work, especially the simpler buildings from the earliest period of his architectural career. The Dunham House is certainly not the finest of this group, but it is representative of Platt's design philosophy. The attention to the placement of the house on the site, his talent for clear axial planning, his urbane mix of New England farmhouse and Renaissance villa, the accommodation of a summer house ideal to the specialized needs of the client are all typical of Platt in the Dunham House and in a score of comparable comfortable summer places that grace the hills, rivers and shore lines of New England resorts at the turn of the twentieth century.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a fuller account of Platt's life and work, see: Keith N. Morgan, *Charles A. Platt. The Artist as Architect*, New York, 1985.
- <sup>2</sup> The Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, holds a complete set of Platt's etchings, including other views of Maine subjects.
- <sup>3</sup> The Cornish colony can be usefully compared to artist communities in Maine. For a fuller discussion of Platt's work for his neighbors, see: Keith N. Morgan, "Charles A. Platt's Houses and Gardens for the Cornish Colony," *Antiques*, July, 1982, pp. 117-129, and Deborah Van Buren, "The Cornish Colony: Expressions of Attachment to Place, 1885-1915," unpublished doctoral dissertation, George Washington University, 1987, especially Chapter 4.
- <sup>4</sup> Charles A. Platt, *Italian Gardens*, New York, 1894.
- <sup>5</sup> For illustrations of these houses, see: Morgan, *The Artist as Architect*, figs. 23 and 24.
- <sup>6</sup> These comparable projects include: the Susan Upham House, Dublin, New Hampshire, 1898; the Mrs. Mary Banks Smoot House, Plainfield, New Hampshire, 1899; the George H. Page House, Chocorua, New Hampshire, 1901; the Lilius Page House, Chocorua, New Hampshire, 1901; the Dr. E. Lindon Mellus House, Dublin, New Hampshire, 1901; the Anna Osgood House, Hadlyme, Connecticut, 1902; the Francis Jencks House, Dublin, New Hampshire, 1902-03; and the Frederick S. Lee House, Woodstock, Vermont, 1906-07.
- <sup>7</sup> For further information on Theodore Dunham, see his obituary in the *New York Times*, November 12, 1951, p. 25.

## LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY CHARLES A. PLATT

Theodore N. Dunham House, Northeast Harbor, 1902, Extant.

Portrait of Charles A. Platt by Thomas Dewing, 1893  
Private Collection.

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